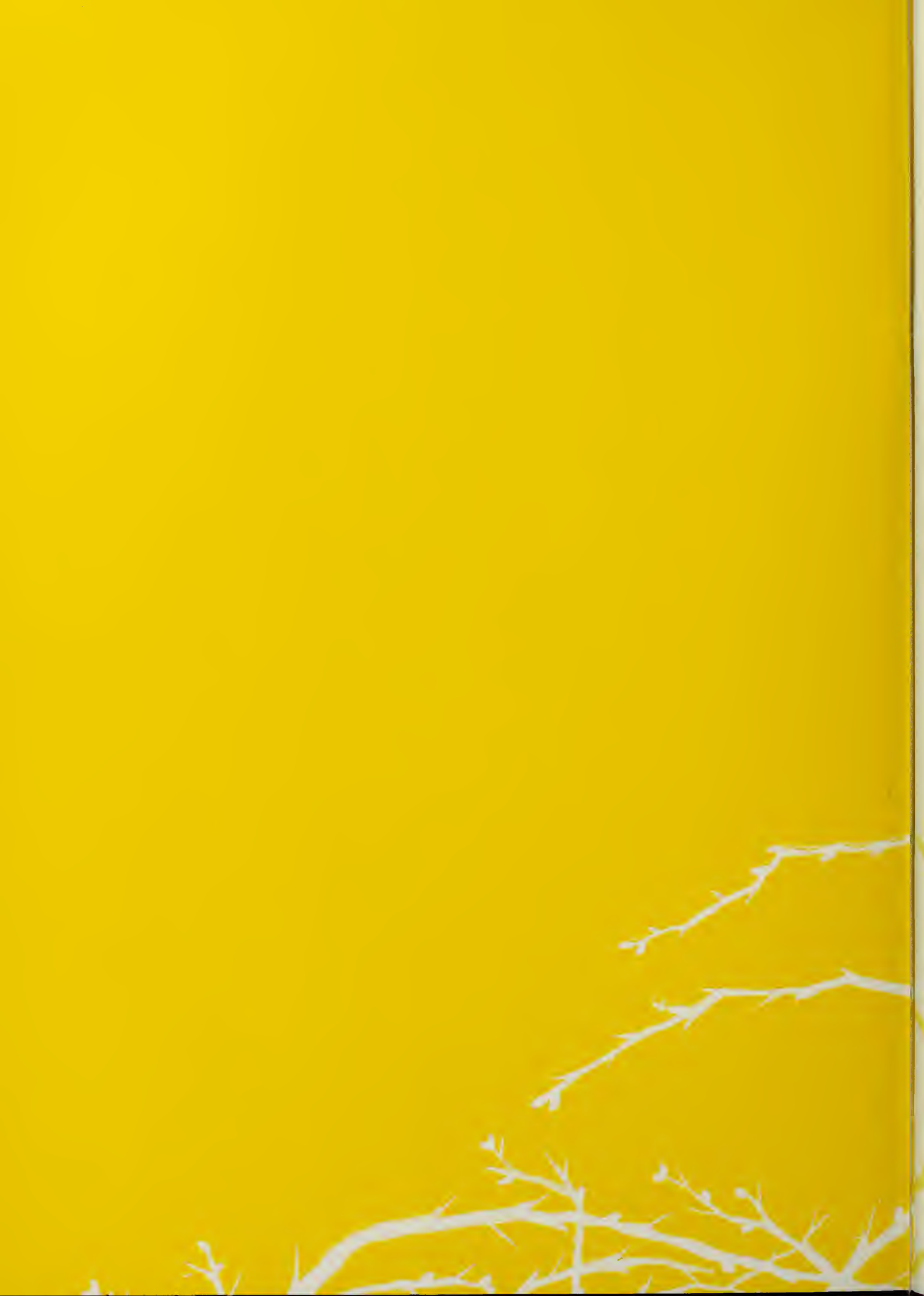




Brutal Beauty

PAINTINGS BY WALTON FORD

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine



The background of the entire page is a light cream or off-white color. Overlaid on this background are several thin, yellow, thorny branches. These branches are bare, with small, sharp thorns visible along their length. They are arranged in a somewhat chaotic, organic pattern, with some branches extending from the top left towards the bottom right, and others branching out in different directions. The overall effect is one of delicate yet sharp, naturalistic detail.

Brutal Beauty

PAINTINGS BY WALTON FORD

Bowdoin College Museum of Art
Brunswick, Maine

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition
of the same name at the
Bowdoin College Museum of Art,
Brunswick, Maine,
September 29 – December 10, 2000.

Lenders to the exhibition:

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Brutal Beauty: Paintings by Walton Ford
is supported by
the Stevens L. Frost Endowment Fund,
the George Otis Hamlin Fund,
and the Elizabeth B. G. Hamlin Fund.

Cover illustration:

The Householder, 1997
oil on wood panel, 63 × 46 inches
Courtesy Janice and Mickey Cartin

Endsheets:

landscape detail from *Chalo, Chalo, Chalo!*, 1997
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
59 1/2 × 40 1/4 inches
Courtesy Bruce Allyn Eissner and Judith Pick Eissner

Photography:

Adam Reich; cover, pp. 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27 and 29
Dennis Griggs; pp. 8 and 14
Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery; pp. 4 and 30

Catalogue design:

Judy Kohn, Kohn Cruikshank, Inc.
Boston, Massachusetts

Printing:

Champagne Lafayette Communications Inc.
Natick, Massachusetts

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ISBN: 916606-32-5

Brutal Beauty: Paintings by Walton Ford

is the largest exhibition of Walton Ford's work to date and focuses on his brilliant, sometimes biting paintings of birds from 1992 to 1999. His realistic depictions of birds are drawn from a nineteenth-century tradition of natural history illustration in which animals and birds are pictured in their natural environment. John James Audubon transformed this tradition into an art by depicting not only different birds' environments but the interactions and behavioral patterns of various species. While Audubon's work has always been popular it has also been controversial, criticized for his less than accurate interpretations of the birds which he instead anthropomorphized. Ford has been interested in Audubon, his work, and its intrinsic contradictions since the early 1990s. He began by creating narrative paintings of Audubon in the wilderness, revealing him not as a lover of nature, as perpetuated by popular myth, but as an individual motivated by ambition and greed. In 1992 Ford turned to Audubon's subject matter itself—North American birds. Ford's meticulous renderings of birds—his early works are based on North American bird species and later ones are based on birds from India—are politically charged commentaries on the current state of the environment, political and cultural affairs, and foreign policy.

A number of reasons make this exhibition of Ford's work particularly appropriate and exciting for Bowdoin. First of all, the museum itself is a beautiful, nineteenth-century McKim, Mead, and White building that provides the perfect context for a contemporary exhibition which critically juxtaposes the art and culture of the nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. The College's Special Collections holds one of Audubon's rare elephant folio *The Birds of America*, a tremendously important treasure that will be on view at the museum during this exhibition. The display of *The Birds of America* will not only make

it possible to observe the stylistic similarities between the work of Audubon and Ford but will allow us to pick out some of Ford's direct quotes from Audubon's works. Franklin Burroughs, one of Bowdoin's most respected English professors and a well-known writer, is preparing for publication a series of essays that revolve around Audubon. In a manner similar to Ford's work, his often autobiographical essays comment upon the state of the environment today. We were fortunate enough to persuade him to look at and respond to Ford's work in an essay for this publication. Lastly, our general audience, for whom the Bowdoin College Museum of Art is a major art institution in the state of Maine, is especially attuned to the care, complexity, and delicacy of the natural environment.

A number of individuals made it possible for us to organize this exhibition. Constance Glenn at the University Art Museum, California State University at Long Beach, and Ron Platt of the Weatherspoon Art Gallery at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, both of whom previously organized exhibitions featuring Ford's work, assisted us in getting started on this project. Bill Arning was also an early supporter of our endeavor and, along with Franklin Burroughs, has contributed an insightful essay to this publication about Ford's work. Clara Ha from the Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, was extremely helpful in assisting us with loans for the exhibition and providing us with reproductions for this publication. Sherrie Bergman and Richard Lindeman very generously and enthusiastically agreed to loan Audubon's elephant folio from the Bowdoin College Library's Special Collections. And most importantly, our thanks and appreciation are extended to the collectors and Walton Ford himself—all of whom, with their utmost generosity, made it possible to realize this exhibition.

Alison Ferris, Curator
Katy Kline, Director



American Flamingo, PHENICOPTERUS P. P. R. old male plate 15.

Visions and Revisions

JOHN JAMES AUDUBON AND
WALTON FORD

FRANKLIN BURROUGHS

THE CAREER of John James Audubon (1785-1851) was nearly run off the road in Philadelphia, in 1824.

Four years earlier, a penniless failure, he had left his wife Lucy and their two sons in Cincinnati, boarded a flatboat, and headed for Louisiana, determined to make what had heretofore been his avocation—the observing, hunting, and drawing of birds—into his vocation. The ambition itself was not original. Audubon knew that Alexander Wilson (1766-1813) had undertaken the same thing, more than a decade earlier, and that, although Wilson had died with his *American Ornithology* still unfinished, the project was being carried on by the French naturalist Charles Lucien Bonaparte, the nephew of Napoleon and erstwhile Prince of Musignano.

In Louisiana, Audubon's painting had undergone a remarkable transformation. He himself recognized this, and saw that he would be able to use very little of his earlier work in the project he envisioned. The Louisiana work was not simply superior in execution; it was different in kind. By 1824, he had enough of a portfolio to go to Philadelphia, confident that he could engage a printer, gain the support of the city's august Academy of the Natural Sciences, and arrange for publication. He intended to do exactly what Wilson had done—publish his work serially, and underwrite the costs of publication by selling subscriptions to it even as he worked to complete it.

His rejection in Philadelphia could not have been more emphatic and complete. Alexander Lawson, the engraver who had done the plates for Wilson's work, examined Audubon's paintings and found them to be ornithologically inaccurate, derivative of Wilson, and not up to Philadelphia's standards of correctness in drawing. When Audubon, stung by this last charge, protested that he had been instructed in his youth by no other than the great Jacques-Louis David, Lawson, correctly suspecting that this was a lie, observed coolly that if such were the case, then it appeared that both master and pupil had wasted their labor.

American Flamingo, 1992
watercolor on paper
52 3/4 x 39 inches

Courtesy United Yarn Products Company, Inc.

6 In collaboration with the atrabilious and pedantic naturalist George Ord, Lawson then saw to it that Audubon received no recognition or support from the Academy of the Natural Sciences. Ord, like Lawson, had been a friend of Wilson, was his literary executor, and had much of his own extensive self-esteem invested in the continuation and promotion of Wilson's book. So professional jealousy—the determination to crush an upstart competitor if at all possible—clearly had a role in Audubon's rejection. But I think there were other, more legitimate and more interesting, issues involved as well.

Two years later, Audubon would take his work to England. There, relying initially on introductions arranged for him by his wife's kinspeople, he would become a sensation, be made a fellow of any number of prestigious learned societies, and find a superb and dedicated engraver, Robert Havell, for his work. The first plates would be published in 1828, and from that point on, despite occasional setbacks and the continuing efforts of Ord, Audubon's star would ascend rapidly, and Wilson's as rapidly decline.

And so, by 1834, when William Dunlap's *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* appeared, the situation was very different from what it had been ten years earlier. There was no way for him to omit Audubon from his survey of American artists, although it is clear that he would have liked to. Dunlap was linked to the cultural and scientific establishment of Philadelphia and shared its views. He admired Wilson and Lawson, and he, like many Easterners, disliked Audubon, finding in his autobiographical writings a great deal of posturing, name-dropping, and pretensions to social eminence. It especially rankled that Audubon owed his success to the hospitality and support of the British gentry, for whom Dunlap, a staunch Anglophobe and a believer in American meritocracy, had no use whatsoever.

He saw a stark contrast between Audubon and Wilson, the latter the son of a Renfrewshire weaver, a political radical, homegrown *philosophe*, dedicated admirer of Thomas Paine, and, as Dunlap described him, "a modest, unpretending man." Wilson's book was equally modest and unpretending, a guide to native birds that had been produced in America and for Americans, whereas Audubon's *Ornithological Biography*, the textual accompaniment to *The Birds of America*, clearly aimed its many romantically exaggerated interpolated accounts of America and Americans at a British audience.

But for all his ideological and personal bias, when Dunlap undertook to evaluate Audubon's work he was obliged, however grudgingly, to acknowledge its distinction. His reasoning is contorted, and its implications are perhaps more complicated than he could allow himself to consider:

The figures [in *The Birds of America*] are the size of life. How much science gains by increasing the size of the picture beyond the size necessary to display all the parts distinctly is with me questionable; but the work of Mr. Audubon, as far as I have seen it, is honorable to his skill, perseverance, and energy. It is gratifying to see the arts of design enlisted in the cause of science, and it is one of many proofs of man's progress toward the goal intended for him. It has been observed that superstition, the enemy of reason, is often the parent and muse of the fine arts. It would be more accurate to say that in the progress of man from barbarism to civilization, ignorance engenders superstition, and artful men enlist in her [i.e. superstition's] cause those arts, which, by diffusing knowledge, will overthrow her. Science and literature become the allies of the fine arts, and, in the ages to come, even more than in the present, art will be the friend and coadjutor of reason, the propagator of truth, and the support of religion.

Dunlap assumes that a picture of a bird has one, and only one, obligation, "to display all the parts distinctly," presumably for purposes of identification and comparative taxonomy. Audubon's double elephant folio—too big

to fit on any ordinary shelf or to consult easily, and too expensive for all but the wealthiest households—so far exceeded this standard that it effectively failed to meet it. But Dunlap's vague generalizations about superstition, reason, barbarism, civilization, and man's progress toward the goal intended for him are intriguing. Not merely ornithological illustration but all art, as Dunlap represents it, is a stalking horse for science and enlightenment. It masks the rational behind what he calls superstition, so that it may impart higher truths to lower minds.

His confident meliorism and rationalism seem to me to skate over a kind of uneasiness, as though Dunlap half suspected not only Audubon's paintings, but also himself, of harboring something that is anti-progressive, not entirely "the friend and coadjutor of reason, the propagator of truth, and support of religion." Unfortunately, Dunlap does not discuss even one of Audubon's paintings in detail—does not indicate what features of his work are outwardly atavistic, calculated to appeal to our barbaric and unenlightened prejudices while beguiling us into the paths of reason and truth. He presumably felt that it would be beneath the dignity of criticism to analyze or interpret a mere ornithological illustration, despite the fact that his own generalizations seem to indicate that Audubon's birds were a good deal more, or a good deal less, than that.

Dunlap's implied agenda had to do with demystifying and demythologizing. It assumed that science and reason would eventually abolish ancient privilege and ancient oppression, and progressively enlarge and enforce the rights of man. Its rational and confident meliorism is of course profoundly American, deriving from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and continuing to demand that we make our past worthy of our future or guilty of our present. Typically, Dunlap can justify the aesthetic only by insisting that it is essentially utilitarian, serving an end beyond itself. The experience of the Sublime or the Beautiful—two hugely influential categories of aesthetic response proposed by Addison,

and brilliantly elaborated in Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry Into...the Sublime and Beautiful* (published in 1757, and, I believe, highly relevant to Audubon)—could not be admitted as an end in itself, one that is in some way necessary to the happiness we are inalienably entitled to pursue. Sublimity and Beauty were associated with a degree of anarchic irrationality—Sublimity with violence and terror, and Beauty with sexual appetite—and thus, in Dunlap's vision of history, each was more or less equivalent to superstition, and had to be sanitized, rehabilitated, and enlisted in the cause of progress.

In Edinburgh, in 1826, Audubon dropped in unannounced on Christopher North, the founder, editor, and chief contributor to *Blackwood's Review*. North was a man of solid learning, a former university professor, a deep-dyed Tory, and among the most influential critics in the kingdom. He might easily have taken offense at Audubon's informality, not to say impertinence, but seems instead to have been charmed by it. And he was more than charmed by the work Audubon showed him. He would eventually review *The Birds of America*, comparing it to Wilson's *American Ornithology*.

In his review, which ran in 1831, North confessed to a great partiality for the abilities, industry, and natural refinement of what he called the "laboring poor" of Scotland. Wilson, who had been a poet, weaver, and peddler in Renfrewshire before he emigrated to America and turned himself into an ornithologist, typified these qualities, and North found them reflected on every page of *American Ornithology*. But North was far enough from Philadelphia and its worldview to see clearly the great distance separating Wilson's book from Audubon's:

[Wilson's] work is a splendid one; but compare the birds there, bright and beautiful as they are, and wonderfully true, too, to nature, with the birds of Audubon, and you feel at one glance the immeasurable and mysterious difference between the living and the dead.



Great-Footed Hawk

John James Audubon, *The Birds of America*
Published by the author 1827-1838, London
Engraved, printed and colored by R. Havell, Jr.
Special Collections & Archives,
Bowdoin College Library

...There is one picture, particularly, of a pair of hawks dining on teals, on which we defy you to look without seeing the large fiery-eyed heads of the hawk beaks moving as they tear the bloody and fleshly feathers, meat and drink in one, the gore-gouts of carnal plumage dropping from, or slicking in the murderous sharpness of their wide-gaping jaws of destruction; if, indeed, you can keep your eyes off their yellow iron legs, stamping and clutching in maddened strides and outstretchings, in the drunken delirium of their famine that quaffs and gobbles up the savage zest of its gratified passion. "The Bill—the whole Bill—and nothing but the Bill" even with "all the Talents" is a poor, frigid, foolish concern [North alludes to the slogan of the most militant parliamentary advocates of the Reform Bill; "all the Talents" was slang for the Prime Minister and his cabinet]; but "the Beak—the whole Beak—and nothing but the Beak"—to which add "all the Talons"—shews Audubon to be such a Radical Reformer as could only burst out upon us from the American wilderness, steeped in its spirit, and familiar with secret murder. He may not thank us for the compliment; but with what suspicious and alarming mastery doth he paint all birds of prey.

The tone of this is peculiar, a strained combination of overheated rhetoric and jocosity. The violently energetic language, full of clashing stresses and awkward alliteration, aims to invest the birds with an apocalyptic menace. And, as North's imagination feeds progressively more on his own rhetoric than on the image in front of him, the apocalyptic menace it evokes sounds more and more like the political one that had haunted Europe since 1789. "Stamping and clutching in maddened strides and outstretchings, in the drunken delirium of their famine that quaffs and gobbles up the savage zest of its gratified passion"—the pair of falcons with their prey begin to blur into a nightmare vision of the Parisian mob, wild with vindictive bloodlust.

North pulls himself up after that sentence. It is as though he recognized that his effort to express the sublime (which Burke had defined as “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror”) effect of Audubon’s painting had led him from ornithology to politics. He recovers by poking clumsy fun at the Reformers, as comparatively tame and orderly heirs of revolutionary violence. But his characterization of Audubon as “a Radical Reformer...familiar with secret murder” is only half facetious. Not that he literally suspected Audubon of homicidal radicalism, but that he saw in this work of natural history a dark empathy for the atavistic violence and savagery of human history.

So North “reads” Audubon’s painting of the bird we know as the Peregrine Falcon as though its subject were mythological or historical. However maladroitly, he is getting at a quality that seems to me indisputably present in Audubon’s work, and that may coincide pretty closely with what Dunlap had meant by “superstition.” Looked at in one way, this quality elevated ornithological illustration to the power and dignity of historical painting or genre painting. Looked at another way, it was far-fetched, with a good deal of the melodramatic, hyperbolic, and ostentatious implausibility that Audubon’s detractors tended to find in the man himself.

The competition between Audubon and Wilson was obviously one-sided, and Audubon’s triumph has been so complete that it is difficult for us now to see how there could have been any competition to begin with. It is oddly parallel to the serio-comic debate about whether the turkey or the bald eagle should become the national emblem. Benjamin Franklin, in championing the turkey, stressed its utility to man and modest and pacific demeanor, as opposed to the tyrannical and bloodthirsty eagle, the traditional symbol of empire and autocracy. Franklin clearly was thinking in terms of an older dichotomy, the stereotypes of the Puritan and the Cavalier,

as they had descended from the English civil wars. Wilson—a dissenter in Scotland, who underwent imprisonment for the impolitic candor of his satires—was self-effacing, enterprising, intrepid, and principled. If something in him anticipates Thoreau, something also harks back to the Puritan fathers of New England. The illustrations in *American Ornithology* reveal the thrifty formal conservatism and the occasional magical naïveté of the artist who remains in many ways an artisan. Audubon, in contrast, hinted at an aristocratic background even as he played the role of the frontiersman, clad in buckskin and moccasins, his romantically unshorn hair brilliantined with bear grease, in the drawing rooms of Liverpool and Edinburgh. He was not in fact aristocratic—or, for that matter, legitimate—but his impetuosity and élan, his passionate fondness for blood sports, music, dancing, and the company of women all supported the idea that he was.

Thus a certain kind of cultural warfare underlies the rivalry of the two camps—Wilson’s, centered in Philadelphia, and Audubon’s, whose champions were in Britain, France, Louisiana, and Charleston, South Carolina. In 19th-century America, the images of the Puritan and the Cavalier had less to do with class or creed than with region—the one being invoked by the North, and the other by the South, as simplified emblems of the historical origins and ideals of conduct that separated them. The Civil War would settle the regional dispute. But had the war ended differently, with the Confederacy’s gaining complete autonomy, the new nation could quite possibly and quite legitimately have claimed Audubon as its first great artist. This is not simply because his paintings so often incorporate distinctively southern flora and landscapes into their designs, but because his birds themselves captured in their flamboyance, violence, and vivid intensity the region’s imagination of itself.

Walton Ford is southern, was drawn to Audubon and to birds at an early age, and has carried those preoccupations into his maturity. He and I have those things in common, and it is not surprising that we do. In an interview three years ago, Ford spoke of how his family's sense of southernness involved Audubon almost as much as it did Robert E. Lee, and that is more or less the case in many other southern households. In my childhood, a small print of Audubon's *Long-billed Curlews* hung above the mantel. It was popular in South Carolina less for the curlews themselves than for the backdrop, with Fort Sumter squatting in the middle distance and beyond that the city of Charleston, its spires rising from the low, familiar skyline. It would now be hard for me to say whether I felt that the painting invested the actual city with a kind of sanctity, or vice-versa.

The history of southern literature is enough to indicate that the southern past is emotionally volatile, evoking unstable combinations of veneration and savage irreverence, myth and counter-myth, in the same breath. But Audubon appears to have been exempted. Robert Penn Warren's poetic sequence *Audubon* and Eudora Welty's short story "A Still Moment" both give us the impassioned bird-lover, intrepid frontiersman, and artist, but not, for example, the man who owned a pair of slaves in Kentucky and, when strapped for cash, sold them down the river to New Orleans, with no evidence of compunction. The work of the South Carolina woodcarver Grainger McKoy is similarly unironic, translating both the elaborate verisimilitude and the mannered extravagance of Audubon into three dimensional form with astonishing fidelity. As far as I know Walton Ford is the first southerner to bring to bear on Audubon the particular kind of intimate, grimly comic iconoclasm that we find, for example, in Flannery O'Connor's "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" or Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

Ford has also spoken of his family's deep pride in its antebellum roots, and of his own discovery, in the diary of an ancestor, of the Old South's capacity for being stunningly oblivious to the stunningly obvious evil of what it daintily referred to as its "peculiar institution." The "Audubon that hangs above the fireplace, [the] stuffed birds" in the gunroom, the belief that "a true southern gentleman would live like a British gentleman on a manor, [as] both a sportsman and a naturalist" became for him inseparable from the economic system that underlay them. And so he began "making, basically, darker versions of the kind of pictures I grew up admiring, like the Audubons." (From "Interview with the Artist" in the exhibition catalogue *Walton Ford*, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, N.C., 1997.)

Ford's work shows a deep familiarity with Audubon's writings as well as his paintings—the influence is as much textual as visual. He illustrates episodes from Audubon's autobiographical writings in the harsh light of historical revisionism, showing a sinister or appalling side to what Audubon had intended as winsome anecdotes of childhood pathos (a villainous monkey that killed his pet parrot) or frontier adventure (hunting bears in a Kentucky cornfield, or buffalo along the Missouri River). The textual quality of Ford's work often requires us to "read" it literally as well as figuratively. He imitates and enlarges upon Audubon's frequent practice of pencilling notes on his paintings, but where Audubon's notes provide data about the bird or instructions to the engraver, Ford's stand as cryptic, contrapuntal observations on the painting itself. Even his calligraphy imitates Audubon's, making the enigmatic content of the notes all the more disconcerting.

I HAVE THE GREAT DISADVANTAGE of having seen only reproductions—and, in some cases, photocopies of reproductions—of Walton Ford's work. I first was shown those—having had no previous awareness that anything like them existed—by Alison Ferris in her office in the lower depths of the Walker Art Building. I brought to them a pretty extensive familiarity with Audubon's life and work, a typically vexed and prickly southern sense of the southern past, a pitifully inadequate and cobbled together awareness of 19th-century American painting, and of art history generally, and an almost perfectly tranquil and unruffled ignorance of contemporary art. I am an English professor, inclined by nature and by nurture to experience the visible world in paraphrase and to infer narratives from images. I think it is best to acknowledge these limited qualifications and extensive disqualifications here, before proceeding further.

My first reaction, there in Alison's office, was the predictable—but for me unexpected—pleasure of recognizing where this painter was coming from, of getting the joke. Mingled with this was a less enthusiastic kind of recognition, one that connected these paintings quite closely to the subject matter and emphasis of the course offerings in almost any undergraduate English department. What I am talking about can be lumped together under the rubric of PC: Political Correctness, Post-Colonialism, and Popular Culture. At least at first glance, the thesis of the paintings seemed to be that the past was a nightmare; that the contents of the nightmare were the human and environmental atrocities of European and Euro-American colonialism/capitalism; and that the idiom of the response to the atrocities owed something to underground comic books and cartoons. All of which gave Alison and me—and the director of the museum, Katy Kline, who came in to join us—a lot to talk about, and ended with my agreeing to write this essay.

As I thought further about it, I found myself thinking about the episodes of Audubon's career that I have already described: his reception in Philadelphia in 1824 and in Britain two years later, and the reactions to his work subsequently published by Christopher North and William Dunlap. It struck me that Ford has done what North, and virtually nobody else, had done—located Audubon's work in a definite historical and political context; or, to say nearly the same thing from the other direction, uncovered a subtextual implication of history and politics in the work. That interested me, because I had for a long time felt that North, in a preliminary and impressionistic way, had been somehow right about the nature of Audubon's work, if not of his politics.

It also seemed to me that William Dunlap's view of Audubon, and of art generally, raised issues almost more relevant to Ford than to Audubon himself. Dunlap was proudly conscious of living in the aftermath of a revolution, one that dethroned the majestic authority of the European past and the cultural and social order it sanctioned. But American art still relied heavily on the European heritage, and so Dunlap was forced to come up with all that business about the artist's availing himself of the anti-progressive, but aesthetically potent, imagery of a barbaric and outmoded history, and making it serve a progressive and enlightened theme. In other words, Dunlap argued that the arts, as handmaidens to progress, did not abandon the emotional appeal of the past, but used it against itself.

The logical extension of Dunlap's argument is that the *moral* or *meaning* of a work of art is separable from the *experience* of it, and is its inspiration, its purpose, and the criterion by which it must be judged. Such a view, very familiar in our own time, tends to give the intellectual or critic an inherent authority over the artist; to give an abstract, conceptual vocabulary authority over the concrete visual or verbal image; and to give the ethical and political realm authority over the aesthetic and private one. It pushes all art in the direction of allegory, where images signify only as they are taken to refer to ideologies.

For me, Ford's work brings these issues and assumptions into focus. Its inspiration and imagery substantially and quite explicitly derive from Audubon; its more or less allegorical and satiric thrust works directly against him. Ford's iconoclasm, at least from the perspective of the English Department, is not new; and its anti-colonial, anti-European and Euro-American, pro-native and pro-environmental stance is in itself something of a cliché in my neck of the woods.

But, in fairness to Ford and to American culture, it must be added that his stance is not merely a faddish and momentary orthodoxy of the academy. *Moby Dick*, for example, takes much the same view toward colonialism, the war against nature, and the horrific excesses of occidental, and particularly American civilization. I do not think those views alone make it a great book, but they are inseparable from the things that do.

Moby Dick came particularly to mind as I was looking at what seems to me the most powerful and ambitious of all of Ford's evocations of Audubon, *The Head Full of Symmetry and Beauty*. The title comes from Audubon's description of a bison he drew on his last great expedition, up the Missouri River; but, in a way that is very typical of Ford's wit, it here suggests the painter's head as well, one that is so preoccupied by symmetry and beauty that it fails to register the carnage that surrounds him, and that has provided him with the subject of his contemplation.

The time in the painting is evening; the sunset provides a backdrop of radiant serenity (and, of course, an allusion to the elegiacally still and spacious skylines of the Luminists). In the background, the Missouri and the bluffs along it reflect this golden glow. As we come toward the foreground, the water grows darker—an angry, inflamed red in the shadows of cliffs that loom against the sky, and of the keelboat that lies in the middle of the river. Audubon—an old man by now, wrapped in a blanket

against the chill—sits bent over his drawing; in front of him, facing him, is the decapitated head of a buffalo. Audubon appears to be sitting between us and a lantern. We cannot see it, but the deck around him and the head of the buffalo are in a pool of yellowish light, making of the painter and his subject a scene that is both within, and slightly apart from, the larger scene.

The rest of the boat is a strange red, approximately the ruddiness of an iron bar that has been taken from the forge and is beginning to cool. On the deck of the boat are many figures, and swimming toward, around, and beyond it is an enormous herd of buffalo. Men and animals both are dark shapes against the glowering background of boat and water.

Apart from its epic scale, this brings *Moby Dick* to mind because of the laminated and varied allusions that underlie its surface, and the almost unbearable contrast it poses between the vast, placid indifference of nature and the murderous hyperactivity of man. I think—although diffidently, keeping in mind my disqualifications—that, if the central allusion of the background is to the fragile peace and delicacy of American luminism, the central allusion of the foreground is to the apocalyptic paintings of Pieter Bruegel. The many shadings of red suggest Bruegel, and the redness has the same quality of being produced by an infernal light, something generated from beneath the surface world of the painting, and not from the heavens above it. The men on the raft—shooting, butchering dead buffalo or trying to grapple them aboard with boathooks—are diabolic in their terrible and somehow mindless intensity. They seem humanoid rather than human, involuntary and swarming instruments of Death. Some of them, especially those lying or crawling on the deck, are gaunt and nearly naked; if they look like the murderous skeletons of *The Triumph of Death* they also convey a hint of the slave ship or slave uprising.

To the right of where Audubon sits drawing, a man pulls himself from the water onto the boat; to the left another man stands impassively, his rifle shouldered, looking down at the painter. Perhaps the first man had only dived or fallen overboard; perhaps the second is simply pausing to watch Audubon at his work. But, positioned as they are, the figures seem more ominous than that: the man with the rifle hems Audubon in on one side; the lithe figure coming up out of the water may not be a buffalo killer at all, but a man bent on murder. The oblivious old naturalist—the Ahab of our ornithology—is at last himself the quarry.

The painting thus invites an allegorical reading, and the condemnation of American history—the revision of our myths of the frontier—that we deduce from such a reading is, by now, old hat. But the painting simultaneously demands to be read as any powerful narrative demands to be read—because of its drama and energy; because it seems to tempt us into thought and tempt us out of it at the same time. Its vision of American history, like Melville's, is sardonic and appalled; it is also, like Melville's, majestic.

Sublimity invites ridicule. Ford knows that; Faulkner and Melville knew it, and all three fuse epic and mock-epic, the heroically visionary and the ironically revisionary. Audubon appears to me to have been a man whose heroic conception of himself admitted no irony. From where we stand, he appears to have taken what had heretofore been a very minor genre—ornithological illustration—and made it the vehicle of a major ambition. The stylized ardor, terror, and pathos of his brown thrashers defending their nest against a marauding blacksnake aspires to the enlarged and resonating reality of a scene from myth, as though this event were emotionally equivalent to Laocoon's struggle to save himself and his sons from the serpents that enveloped them. The elemental, passionate grandeur of the mythic world survives, Audubon seems to be telling us, in the wild. And I think that we have for a long time been happy to take his word for it, without much in the way of second thoughts.



John James Audubon: The Head
Full of Symmetry and Beauty, 1991
 oil on linen
 64 3/4 × 93 3/4
 Reproduction courtesy
 The Contemporary Arts Center,
 Cincinnati



Ferruginous Thrush

John James Audubon, *The Birds of America*
 Published by the author 1827-1838, London
 Engraved, printed and colored by R. Havell, Jr.
 Special Collections & Archives,
 Bowdoin College Library

Ford's work is very much a consequence of second thoughts, of reconsiderations of a painter and a heritage he had at first accepted wholeheartedly. Once admitted, such thoughts come to us very easily because of what we now are. The transformation of the Young Republic into the Last Empire Standing has transformed us from citizens into consumers; our relation to nationality, to history, and to nature itself has come to seem optional. The ubiquitous language and imagery of advertising taints all language and all imagery, and the emotions they evoke in us. The impulse toward deconstructive analysis is fostered in us by commercials and campaign speeches far more effectively and profoundly than by lectures and essays. It is an impulse that can very easily find unintended parody in the naïve and immoderate ambition of a work like Audubon's brown thrashers. Or in his famous and statuesque wild turkey, the bird that he chose to be the first engraving in *The Birds of America*, and that Ford caricatures in *Our Emblem, the Mighty Franklin Warcock*.

Influence runs two ways. The work of the predecessor echoes in the work of the successor; the work of the successor echoes back against the source of its inspiration. I do not think we can, or should, now see Audubon in quite the same way we saw him before. Nor do I think that Ford's attitude toward Audubon is simple; in the context of an intensely wary (or merely indifferent) cultural attitude toward the past, parody and caricature may be forms of homage. In a painting like *Derision* he is able to have his cake and eat it too. And it seems to me that his mockery turns at least partly against itself in paintings like *American Flamingo* or *Bereft*. His impulse toward the comic book and the cartoon, set against the painstaking re-creation of Audubon's scrupulous accuracy, suggest something of the present's tendency toward the ephemeral, and something of the simplification or sensationalism involved in our glibly self-congratulatory sense of superiority to the past.

I am most impressed by Ford's most ambitious canvases. Of the ones I have seen, these would be *The Head Full of Symmetry and Beauty* and the elaborately beautiful and genuinely shocking *Chingado*. Both, especially the latter, involve a high degree of wit and allusiveness, but neither is merely an ironic exercise in irony. They have the power to haunt.

In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," Yeats considered all that had been lost in the aftermath of a cataclysmic war and revolution. The losses were spiritual as well as literal; among the survivors, the only possible attitude toward the high ambitions and intentions of the past was mockery, and it spared no one, not even the mockers themselves. Two years later, in "Meditations in Time of Civil War," he considered an Anglo-Irish great house. Its beauty, and the culture it nourished, existed through the efforts of "bitter and violent" men and through the oppressions they inflicted—every fine or splendid detail of it was a monument to colonial exploitation. Yeats, a man of inexhaustible ambivalence, expresses the fear that he and his generation, spared the violence of this past, might have thereby lost its capacity for greatness.

The analogies to the South are obvious, and Ford, like Yeats, has found in his local and family history paradigms of history in general. He is of course separated from Yeats by a multitude of historical, cultural, and national circumstances, and by enormous differences of temperament. But, although he may not thank me for saying it, his work, even as it delights in mockery and self-mockery, suggests that the bitterness and violence of our history are woven into the greatness of its artifacts. And yet to disown them is to belittle the scope of our own imagining.

Franklin Burroughs is the Harrison King McCann Professor of the English Language at Bowdoin College. He has written two books, *Billy Watson's Croker Sack* and *The River Home*, has published essays in journals such as *Georgia Review*, *Harpers Magazine*, *The Southern Review* and *Gettysburg Review*, and has had his work included in such anthologies as *Best American Essays* and *The Pushcart Prize*. The life and work of John James Audubon has figured in several of his essays, particularly "Passion and Conquest," which was published in the *Gettysburg Review* in autumn of 1997.

Walton Ford's Non-Fiction Fiction

BILL ARNING

16

ALL ART FORMS that have the potential to tell a story—(loosely defined “someone did something”)—presuppose a division between fiction and non-fiction. Literature, film, drama all take for granted these categories as well as our need to decide into which camp a work falls before we experience, much less interpret the work. It does not matter if the majority of works fall between the two categories. The non-fiction storyteller must embellish history to make a better tale and the fiction storyteller has no choice but to draw from the experience of lived lives and historical, cultural events.

Yet strangely the Western picturing tradition, which includes depictive painting and all non-abstract photography, rarely deploys these categories. One would be startled to see a museum hang its collections along these lines—fiction to the right, non-fiction to the left—as bookstores do. In the field of photography, the categories of staged vs. documentary (in other words fiction/non-fiction) are still problematized and interesting. But in painting the terms fiction/non-fiction are not mentioned. Perhaps the very act of painting images after Modernism, together with the universal availability of photography, has made creating a world with brushstrokes alone too conspicuously artificial for anyone even to consider the factual as a benchmark.

Non-fiction painting genres have existed but today have few practitioners. History painting was an academic discipline often glorifying the battles of some monarch, and the resulting works were used to decorate palaces as a type of public relations campaign. Depictions of such tales of glory became less urgent after the age of palaces passed. The job of directly recording history at the moment falls to CNN.

Another non-fiction genre was scientific painting. In this mode, the accuracy of the depiction was the prime value. Works had to be able to serve in lieu of an actual specimen as a teaching tool. This type of functional painting was another victim of historical progress. Even a poor photograph could make a greater claim to accuracy than the most detailed illustration.

Walton Ford knows what time it is in the culture. He is aware that the reasons why history and scientific painting died away are not resistible. Yet over the past decade he has perversely pursued the genres through a hybrid of scientific and historical painting. As a political and conceptual practice, he has used dead and/or dated languages of painting to speak of humankind's relationship to nature, of the folly of anthropomorphizing animals, of Audubon, India, and colonialism. Ford is a quintessentially conceptual painter, and it is tempting to decode his paintings merely to extract the information they contain. But, as even the most hard-core,

Chalo, Chalo, Chalo!, 1997
watercolor, gouache,
pencil and ink on paper
59 1/2 x 40 1/4 inches
Courtesy Bruce Allyn Eissner
and Judith Pick Eissner



1. *Phalaropus lobatus* (Lepidopterus lobatus)

2. *Phalaropus lobatus* (Lepidopterus lobatus)

3. *Phalaropus lobatus* (Lepidopterus lobatus)

4. *Phalaropus lobatus* (Lepidopterus lobatus)

language-based conceptual artist knows, form and content can never be separated, and the what and the how are always part of the meaning. Ford's self-education in learning to paint in these styles gives a shape and feel to his project that fundamentally changes our ability to receive his content.

On first encounter entering the gallery we note all the markers of a familiar and comforting art. We let our defenses down. Surely there can be no avant-gardist provocation here, we think—wrongly, as it turns out. The bizarre details in every picture—which might have sent us away in a panic if they were the first things we saw—keep us trapped because we have already mentally opened the door and invited them in. Ford's content—literary, poetic, political, activist, magical—is delivered deep into our craniums where the details are filed in our subconscious at a deeper, and more dangerous, level than if we had gleaned the same content from an editorial.

Of course there is the risk of confusion in Ford's project. Because the painting languages he employs are from the realm of non-fiction painting it is easy to assume that the value of his work is located entirely in its factual qualities. Actually the facts Ford shares with us may be crucial to the work—his research and engagement with the information is critical to the process—but in the end facts are not what make the work so compelling. Like other great fact-based artists—Goya, Daumier, Granville—the importance of the artist's specific referents and his ideological position in relation to them—will be lost over time although the work will retain its hold on us. That is because when we consider the question of fiction/non-fiction we must answer with a firm and hearty "both." Ford's fictions are as mesmerizing as his truths.

Ford hit his professional stride in the 1980s making narrative paintings of the dark side of contemporary American culture. In one celebrated early work, *Lunch Break with Nature Boy*, a teenager scares his friends with a snake, foreshadowing Ford's later fertile adventures on the nature/culture borderline, telling stories that resonate in our psyches. And, as in this example, he was adept at finding that one moment in a larger implied narrative which contains the most enthralling, juiciest bit of the tale. We have no way of knowing whether the complete tale exists elsewhere (although Ford tells us these are family stories, so their longer forms exist only around Ford family holiday dinners).

Still, Ford confronted the inevitable limit point of narrative painting. In order to inform the viewer as to who is doing what to whom, one needs an increasingly elaborate symbolic language. Among art historical precedents are the addition of background vignettes which depict either earlier scenes

Devotees, 1996
watercolor, gouache,
pencil and ink on paper
30 × 22 inches
Courtesy
Laura-Lee W. Woods

Devotees -



1 Indian Flying Fox - *Pteropus giganteus* - (Kinde-fadel) 2 European Starling - *Sturnus vulgaris*

in the story or objects that will figure later, as when a soon-to-be-martyred saint holds the instruments of his execution. These strategies usually derived from the sphere of religious painting in which the viewer is presumed already to know the story. With family histories one cannot make that assumption. And such added images must still work visually for the viewer disinclined toward decoding. Ford's early attempts to deal with Audubon within a narrative structure seemed to confront the inadequacy of selecting any one scene from such a big story.

When Ford began to consider John James Audubon it was at first his story that he wanted to tell. As it has been recounted in nearly every piece of critical writing on Ford I feel no need to repeat it here, except to note the chasm between the public perception of Audubon as a pal of the "Birds of America" and the actual paranoid one-man-avian-holocaust that really lived.

In mimicking Audubon's mode of informational painting, in inhabiting his persona, in moving his brush and hand in Audubon's gestures, Ford revivifies the overweening historical character. Audubon is inhabited by Ford and, in a sense, walks among us again. In fact the allure of Ford's paintings is indistinguishable from the almost erotic pleasure we first received from the powerful pages of *The Birds of America*. It is almost as if we realize that our current companion is the spitting image of a now deceased former lover. Ford uses our disquiet to more deeply and emphatically engage us in his own love/hate relationship to Audubon.

Ford gives us the reasons why we should mistrust Audubon—and we accede to a point—but he also holds him up as the model for every artist, the creep who will do anything to make his work, who will remake reality for his own purposes. Ford has mastered the hybrid fiction/non-fiction painting in order to remake the real according his own wishes. This is magic, and what figure makes a better primal artist than Audubon. In fact, any artist who can take art pigments and hubris to make such believable fictions must both hope and fear the bit of Audubon within.

Audubon's attitude towards the hapless birds he dispatched was not unusual for his time. Animals were not fellow beings but machines one could take apart to observe their workings, then classify and record. Ford's attitude, and mine, and I presume yours, is that animals should be treated well; even the carnivores among us would prefer to see animal suffering diminished. Yet we know that there will never be a definitive determination that our attitudes are enlightened and that those of Audubon's time were wrong. Humanity cannot adequately atone for the havoc brought on the natural world, and nature would have little reason to care about our collective remorse. So while historical revision is clearly part of Ford's project it cannot be the whole.

Dialogue, 1996
watercolor, gouache, pencil
and ink on paper
60 × 40 inches
Courtesy Martin Kline

Dialogue - (Kalla व्यापारी !)



1 European Starling - *Sternus vulgaris* - (Europe, introduced elsewhere) 2 Great Indian Hornbill - *Buccones buccinus* (India, and parts of Asia)

Rather, what Ford does in a painting like *American Flamingo* is exactly what Audubon had done before. Audubon took live birds and killed them in order more perfectly to depict life. Ford, with similar hubris, attempts to conjure the picture-perfect image of death. If Audubon bizarrely compressed a bird's body to fit his frame, Ford metaphorically does the same. If Audubon's carnage resulted in great beauty—and his *Birds of America* remains unquestionably beautiful even after our loss of innocence—Ford's works also allow us the experience of an aestheticized death, a symbolic martyrdom. The flamingo's feathers are still a gorgeous pink, its neck still describes an elegant S-curve and even the plumes of blood pouring from its wound shoot forth in luscious crimson rivulets like strings of rubies. The bird's death is unnatural not simply because it was shot but because it has been transformed into a pictorial experience and has entered into the rarefied regime of visual language.

In *Sensations of an Infant Heart*, a beautiful parrot is murdered by a chained pet monkey. The scene is taken from a childhood memory of Audubon's and the bird was his favorite among a veritable zoo of pets. The monkey looks at us as if aware that in inflicting this trauma on the child Audubon, his act sows the seeds of evil, perhaps as revenge on God for his imprisonment. The scene is one of grand drama on an operatic scale. But we know that animals kill each other brutally for reasons that make sense to them. As I was writing this essay a story appeared in the papers. The daughter of a minor celebrity was traumatized when her beloved off-leash Jack Russell terrier was drowned by a swan it had approached in Central Park, a story hauntingly close to Audubon's. The swan had babies nearby and the canine was an easily dispatchable threat. Whatever the monkey's motives, they were probably not evil but practical. Yet when we translate animal lives into art we cannot help but anthropomorphize the participants. The experience of nature on its own terms will elude us as inevitably as it did Audubon.

On a similar topic Ford did a series of paintings in which animals found guilty of crimes are executed. In *A Guilty Cock* we have man finding nature—in this case a cock—guilty of a crime against nature. Nobody seems to have told the poor male bird that it was not his place to lay an egg. Exaggerated responses to such bizarre cases demonstrate the human folly which pretends control over, and the right to define, what is natural. Clearing the bird's record is obviously not the artist's aim. Though the fable is intriguing, its importance lies in the light it sheds on our limited appreciation of our position in the natural order. While current political issues (such as gay parenting or mandatory gender assignment surgery for infants born with hermaphroditic features) to which the painting may refer will change, we can be certain that new follies will replace them.

*Sensations of
an Infant Heart*, 1999
watercolor, gouache, pencil
and ink on paper
59½ × 40½ inches
Courtesy
Jerald Dillon Fessenden

Sensations of an Infant Heart

Nantes - c 1730



1 Military Macaw - Los Molinos 2 Red-bellied Parakeet - Nantes

Ford also takes our inability to see nature without a veil of culture as his topic in his 1996 work, *Our Emblem, the Mighty Franklin Warcock*. The turkey, according to Benjamin Franklin, should have been our national bird, chosen on the basis of its ability to feed us and give us the strength to build the country. Instead we chose the more vicious bald eagle because the turkey was ungainly and too “soft” to prop up our national ego. Ford presents his turkey as a killing machine with a passenger pigeon under its talons. The passenger pigeon becomes in Ford’s hands the synecdoche for nature brutally eliminated in the USA’s march toward progress. This bird once filled the skies but is now extinct. Ford’s bloodthirsty turkey embodies our forefathers’ vision of themselves, and this self-image projected itself in a ruthless expansionism that cleared the pigeons from the sky. In the Western mindset nature is worth preserving as long as it is not inconvenient.

To gain access to a different mindset Ford traveled to India for six months. This ancient culture does not allow for animals to be disturbed and chooses instead to decline opportunities for what outsiders would consider necessary progress and modernization. Ford paints the wildlife of India not as unmediated nature, but rather as a reflection of his growing awareness of India’s relationship to the Western world. Ford wants to share his acknowledgment of his own difficulty in understanding India. In six months he felt he had barely scratched the surface and could claim no expertise. He wanted in all humility to expose this superficiality, and thereby call into question all self-appointed outside experts.

In order to effectively reach us, Ford repeats the approach of his Audubon series. He manipulates our ability to receive his information first by comforting us with his glorious watercolor technique, then by stunning us with his extravagantly gorgeous fauna, and then hitting us with his intended content once we are in his trap. Typical Indian birds such as the Bustard and the Marabou Stork are wild looking creatures; even straightforward portraits of them with Ford’s exquisite execution would be a satisfying visual experience. Face to face with their plumage and bills we find ourselves rapt as if we were tourists. In *Chalo, Chalo, Chalo!* our first impression is of the majesty of the ungainly bird with its vivid red markings. Only then do we notice the bizarre scenario of multiple smaller birds feasting on fruit in its oversize bill. The stork could obviously put a quick end to their orgiastic feeding by simply closing its mouth, trapping the carefree birds inside. Although this behavior would never occur, Ford takes care that it appear, at least to non-ornithologists, plausible. Our credulity leads us to understand that the scale of the stork in relation to the smaller birds stands for India’s mass and population in relation to the world. Our understanding is enhanced by learning that the Marabou Stork

Baba-B.G., 1997
watercolor, gouache, pencil
and ink on paper
41 3/8 × 29 1/8 inches
Private collection
Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery

Baba - G. G.



1 Belted Kingfisher 2 Whitebreasted Kingfisher 3 Blue eared Kingfisher 4 Ruddy Kingfisher 5 Whitebreasted Kingfisher 6 Blackcapped Kingfisher
 7 Rufous-backed Kingfisher 8 Blyth's Kingfisher 9 Threelined Kingfisher

eats carrion and, by virtue of its strength, can puncture the hide of thick-skinned beasts to allow smaller, weaker carrion-eating creatures access to the flesh. We marvel at this symbol for India, massive, ancient and endlessly patient with the parasitic outside forces that want either to improve it or to profit from it.

Like a pictorial Aesop, Ford uses his birds to speak of a broad range of human absurdities. In the background of *The Householder* hippies sunbathe in the buff, as they do in Goa, India. Endlessly tolerant, India accepts the behavior while holding itself to stricter habits. India's own more ascetic code of conduct is represented here by the great Indian Hornbill who walls up the female to protect her and their brood. The male feeds her through a hole. While this scene, which does occur in nature, is as strange to us as the small birds feasting in the stork's mouth, its implication when translated back into human terms is shocking—or perhaps not. Ford's scenarios present us with a dilemma. Can we suspend ethnocentrism to comment meaningfully on gender roles in other cultures where the female is essentially imprisoned? True Hindus would find the couple's behavior to be praiseworthy and holy. There will always be things we interpret as misogynous in other cultures—bound feet, genital cutting, arranged marriages—they may in fact be so. When Ford juxtaposes the hornbills with the hippies he is drawing attention to modern India's ability to withstand outside influences without significantly altering its values. The swarms of promiscuous European starlings do not seem to affect the hornbill's established way of doing things. It seems that the ancient ways are fixed and impervious to outside influence.

And yet India is a materially poor country and the lure of market goods may be impossible to resist. In *NGO Wallabs* (standing for non-governmental organization experts), the Wallah offers Hershey's chocolate kisses—shiny, tasty, and not very good for long-term health. The large ancient bird watches aghast as the kisses, like trivial American TV shows, are greedily devoured around the world.

In *Baba BG* America's technology celebrity Bill Gates appears as a kingfisher. Based on Gates's trip to India, the painting alludes to the expectation (at least in the Indian press) that the corporate mogul would offer words of wisdom which could provide India with the tools to pull itself from poverty. Instead Gates apparently offered little more than platitudes amounting to a celebration of his own wealth. But like the kingfisher audience in the painting, the press was thrilled to register the multitude of fish the Baba BG has collected, and to scramble for the few clues he inadvertently dropped about developing a high tech industry. Money systems are, of course, the organic circulation system among cultures and may finally penetrate and alter India more profoundly than

N.G.O. Wallabs, 1997
watercolor, gouache, pencil
and ink on paper
41 3/8 x 29 3/4 inches
Courtesy
Laura-Lee W. Woods

N. L. O. wallace



1 Indian Marabou (*Leptoptilos dubius*) 2 Indian Lark (*Larus verreauxi*) 3 Unconstrained Barbet (*Cypripetris*) 4 Green Bee Eater (*Micropus orientalis*) 5 European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

all the previous waves of outside religions, colonizers, missionaries, and armies of self-appointed “friends.”

Ford’s work is political; his subjects are inspired by his deeply thoughtful experience in the social and political world, yet his works are never didactic. Ford understands that cultures are not static. He cannot change how India relates to the world, or stop outsiders from trying to impose themselves on it. His Indian pictures are fundamentally pictures of folly, as are his Audubon pictures. To fully decode these paintings we would like to have the skills of avid birders and be able to identify what birds these are—where they come from—what they eat. Yet is this knowledge ultimately necessary for a profound experience of the painting?” Do the fictions function without the non-fiction base?

In *Accounts* smaller birds peck at a larger bird, drawing trickles of blood from its neck. The bird appears annoyed but patient. In *Diagnosis* three birds inspect another, bigger bird’s throat, going so deep as to cause us to retch in sympathy. For reasons we do not understand, the larger bird allows them to feed on her last meal. We suspect that on one level the scene relates to self-serving and invasive Western expert diagnoses of India’s situation, but it could also reference an intrusive boss, controlling teacher, or the strangling paralysis of self-doubt. These stories are so visually seductive that the specifics of Ford’s inspiration are titillating and interesting yet finally not very important. His fictions are archetypal enough to be recoded and re-associated over time. We explicate these pictures today to inform the small minority of museum visitors in the year 2300 who will be curious as to which of our trivial global concerns inspired them. Ultimately, though, the specifics will not matter; they will just be grateful for Ford’s gorgeous pictorial assistance in comprehending the follies of their own times, which will be just as absurd as ours.

Bill Arning is presently curator at the MIT List Visual Art Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Before that he was chief curator of White Columns Alternative Space in New York City, where he organized exhibitions that introduced the work of young artists into the New York art scene. His most recent exhibition, *Achieving Failure—Gym Culture 2000*, was organized for Thread Waxing Space in New York. Arning is a frequent writer on art for *Time Out New York*, *The Village Voice*, *Art in America*, *World Art*, *Trans*, *Polliester*, *Bomb*, *Honcho* and *Out* magazines, and he has authored catalogue essays for museums, alternative spaces, and commercial galleries around the world.

Diagnosis, 1996
watercolor, gouache, pencil
and ink on paper
40½ × 26 inches
Courtesy Madison Cox

Craggs -

STO 2 22 2 22



Frigatebird - Black - Red legs - Green snake - Two small black birds - Water - City skyline



Derisions, 1993
watercolor on paper, 40 × 26 inches
Courtesy Rogers Beasley

Walton Ford

BBorn 1960, White Plains, New York
Lives and works in Hillsdale, New York

EDUCATION

1982 BFA, Rhode Island School of Design,
Providence, Rhode Island; European Honors
Program, Rhode Island School of Design,
Rome, Italy

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2000

Brutal Beauty: Paintings by Walton Ford
Bowdoin College Museum of Art,
Brunswick, Maine (catalogue)

Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York

1999

University Art Museum, California State
University, Long Beach, California

Kohn-Turner Gallery,
Los Angeles, California

1998

Walton Ford, Paul Kasmin Gallery,
New York

1997

Walton Ford, Southeastern Center for
Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem,
North Carolina; traveled to Aspen Art
Museum (catalogue)

Walton Ford: Recent Paintings & Watercolors,
Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York

1993

Walton Ford: Procrustean Beds, Nicole
Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, in collaboration
with Michael Klein, Inc., New York

1991

Walton Ford, Bess Cutler Gallery,
Santa Monica, California

1990

The Blood Remembers, Bess Cutler Gallery,
New York

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2000

Déjà Vu: Reworking the Past, The Katonah
Museum of Art, Katonah, New York

1999

Collectors Gallery XXXIII,
The McNay Gallery, San Antonio, Texas

The Great Drawing Show 1550-1999,
Kohn-Turner Gallery, Los Angeles, California

Summer Show: 1999, Paul Kasmin Gallery,
New York

Armory Show, The Armory Show 1999,
New York

1998

Wild Thing: Artists' Views of the Animal World,
John Berggruen Gallery,
San Francisco, California

1997

Summer, Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York

*Animal Tales: Contemporary Bestiary and Animal
Painting*, Whitney Museum of American Art at
Champion, Stamford, Connecticut (brochure)

1996

Landscapes, Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York

Heroic Painting, Southeastern Center for
Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North
Carolina; traveled to Tampa Museum of Art;
Queens Museum of Art; Knoxville Museum of
Art; The Contemporary Arts Center,
Cincinnati; Nevada Museum of Art;
Mississippi Museum of Art; University Gallery,
University of Massachusetts at Amherst;
Chicago Cultural Center; Phoenix Art
Museum; The Columbia Museum of Art,
South Carolina (catalogue)

Classics Revisited,
Winston Wachter Fine Art, New York

1995

Next of Kin, MIT List Visual Arts Center,
Cambridge, Massachusetts (catalogue)

A Vital Matrix, Domestic Settings,
Los Angeles, California (catalogue)

Walton Ford, Jimmie Durham, Ho Gallery,
Hong Kong

Americana, Grand Salon, New York

1994

*Asbley Bickerton, Jimmie Durham, Walton Ford,
Jeff Wall*, Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York

Points of Interest, Points of Departure, John
Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, California

American Landscape, Michael Klein, Inc.,
New York

History 101: The Re-Search For Family,
The Forum for Contemporary Art,
St. Louis, Missouri (catalogue)

1993

*Living With Art: The Collection of Ellyn and
Saul Demison*, The Morris Museum,
Morristown, New Jersey

Kurswechsel, Michael Klein, Inc., at
Transart Exhibitions, Cologne, Germany

Walton Ford and Julie Jones, Contemporary Arts
Center, Cincinnati; traveled to Contemporary
Art Center of Virginia (catalogue)

1992

The Landscape as Stage, Marion Locks
Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (brochure)

1991

Junge Amerikanische und Deutsche Malerei,
Galerie Schulze, Cologne, Germany

*Artists' Books From A to B: Contemporary
Artists' Books*, Center for Book Arts,
Harper Collins, New York

*In the Looking Glass: Contemporary Narrative
Paintings*, Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte,
North Carolina (catalogue)

Group Show, Bess Cutler Gallery, New York

1990

A Sense of Place, Montgomery Museum of
Fine Arts

Critical Revisions, Bess Cutler Gallery,
New York

Collectors' Choice of Emerging Artists—1990,
Vered Gallery, East Hampton, New York

Brut 90, White Columns, New York

1989

American Pi(e), Bess Cutler Gallery, New York

1988

Un Regard Autre, Farideh Cadot Gallery,
Paris, France

Ten Painters, White Columns, New York

1987

*The Other Man: Alternative Representations
of Masculinity*, The New Museum of
Contemporary Art, New York (brochure)

AWARDS

1992

John Simon Guggenheim Memorial
Foundation Fellowship

1991

National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship

1989

New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship

The Pollock-Krasner Foundation

1988

Art Matters, Inc. Fellowship

The Penny McCall Foundation

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

University Art Museum,
California State University, Long Beach

Walton Ford is represented by the
Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York

Selected articles and reviews

PERIODICALS

2000

Vincent, Steven. "Get In Line."
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1999

Zellen, Jody. "Yoshitomo Nara,
Tim Ebner, Jo Ann Callis, Walton Ford."
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1998

Gomez, Edward. "Past is Present."
Art & Antiques (December 1998): 64-65.

Knight, Michael. "Birdland:
The Ineluctable Rules of Migration."
New Yorker 9 November 1998, p. 83.

Cheever, Susan. "Country House Art
Gallery: Jackie & Irving Blum's
Interior View." *Architectural Digest* 5
(July 1998): 158-163.

Hirsch, Faye. "Working Proof."
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Dougherty, Linda Johnson.
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Miller, Jamie. "The Critical Nature
of Ford." *Aspen Magazine*
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1997

Rubenstein, Raphael. "Walton Ford
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Twardy, Chuck. "Walton Ford."
New Art Examiner 25 (October 1997): 53.

Frankel, David. "Walton Ford: Paul Kasmin
Gallery." *Artforum* 36 (October 1997): 100.

Eugenides, Jeffrey. "Walton Ford."
Bomb (Fall 1997): 79.

Wakefield, Neville. "Walton Ford:
Crosscurrents of Seduction and Repulsion
in a Revisionist Audubon Milieu."
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"Goings on about Town: The Latest Fords"
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1996

Melrod George. "The Great Outdoors."
Art & Antiques 19 (December 1996): 29-30.

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1994

Bayliss, Sarah. "Walton Ford at Nicole
Klagsbrun." *Art in America* 82 (May 1994):
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Rubenstein, Raphael. "Walton Ford
at Nicole Klagsbrun." *ARTnews* 93
(February 1994): 142.

Ziolkowski, Thad. "Walton Ford
at Nicole Klagsbrun." *Artforum* 32
(February 1994): 87.

Cameron, Dan. "Ode to Discernment."
Frieze 19 (January/February 1994): 36-40.

1992

Durham, Jimmie. "To Be a Pilgrim:
Walton Ford." *Artforum* 30 (January 1992):
58-61.

1991

Redd, Chris. "In the Looking Glass."
Art Papers 15 (September/October 1991):
55-56.

1990

Liu, Catherine. "Walton Ford at Bess
Cutler Gallery." *Artforum* 28 (May 1990):
185.

Mahoney, Robert. "Walton Ford at
Bess Cutler Gallery." *Arts Magazine* 64
(May 1990): 109-110.

NEWSPAPERS

2000

Johnson, Ken. "Art in Review."
New York Times, 2 June 2000, B38.

Varadajan, Tunku. "How to Spend it:
Allegory on the Nila."
Financial Times, 27 May 2000, XII.

Johnson, Ken. "Art in Review."
New York Times, 26 May 2000, B36.

1999

Ollman, Leah. "A Philosophical Take on
Zoology in Walton Ford's Wry Paintings."
Los Angeles Times, 5 March 1999, F31.

1998

Schwendenwein, Jude. "Scary 'Animal Tales'
in Stamford." *Hartford Courant*,
22 February 1998, G4.

Holg, Garrett. "Painting Larger than Life/
Heroic Style Updated." *Chicago Sun-Times*,
8 February 1998, Sec. Showcase, 14.

Zimmer, William. "Animals That Have
Some Stories to Tell." *New York Times*, 25
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1997

Humphrey, Jacqueline. "Audubon
Imitations Reflect Society's Ills." *News and
Record* (Piedmont Triad, North Carolina),
31 July 1997, Sec. CL, 9.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Street Value."
Village Voice, 6 May 1997, 97.

Falkenstein, Michelle. "Shiva's Pets."
New York Press, 23-29 April 1997, 20-21.

"Review of Exhibition."
Village Voice, 29 April 1997, 18.

1996

Zimmerman, David. "Art Exhibit Casts a
Critical Eye at the Concept of Heroism."
USA Today, 29 October 1996, Sec. Life, 6D.

Kimmelman, Michael. "History Painting:
Yes, Those Enormous Canvases." *New York
Times*, 30 August 1996, Sec. C, 27.

Lipson, Karen. "Portrait of a Hero:
Contemporary Artists Probe a Classic
Theme." *Newsday*, 26 July 1996, Sec. II,
B20.

Twardy, Chuck. "We can be heroes."
News & Observer (Raleigh, North Carolina),
22 March 1996, D1.

1995

Taylor, Robert. "Gorillas in Our Midst;
'Next of Kin' Brings Home Simian
Similarities." *Boston Globe*,
16 November 1995, Sec. Living, 65.

Silver, Joanne. "Visual Arts MIT Exhibit
Explores Our Kinship with 'Apes.'"
Boston Herald, 13 October 1995, S21.

1994

Colby, Joy Hakanson. "Traveling Exhibit
Reopens Debate on Audubon's Values."
Detroit News, 11 August 1994, D1.

1993

Annas, Teresa. "The Two Faces of
John James Audubon." *Virginia-Pilot*, 11
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1991

Maschal, Richard. "Through the Looking
Glass." *Charlotte Observer*, 21 July 1991, 1F.

Works in the exhibition

Measurements are height before width.

Works marked with an asterisk (*) are illustrated in this publication.

- * *American Flamingo*, 1992
watercolor on paper
52 3/4 x 39 inches
Courtesy United Yarn Products Company, Inc.

American Sparrow Hawk, 1992
watercolor on paper
52 3/4 x 39 inches
Courtesy Bill Arning

Blue Jay, 1992
watercolor on paper
52 3/4 x 39 inches
Courtesy United Yarn Products Company, Inc.

Bereft, 1993
watercolor and gouache on paper
26 x 40 inches
Courtesy Rogers Beasley

- * *Derisions*, 1993
watercolor on paper
40 x 26 inches
Courtesy Rogers Beasley

Night Hawks, 1993
watercolor on paper
30 3/4 x 44 1/2 inches
Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun

A Guilty Cock #1, 1994
oil on wood panel
60 x 40 x 2 inches
Courtesy Janice and Mickey Cartin

Avatars: The Birds of India, 1996
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
59 x 40 inches
Courtesy Janice and Mickey Cartin

Conclusions, 1996
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
30 x 22 inches
Courtesy Laura-Lee W. Woods,

- * *Devotees*, 1996
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
30 x 22 inches
Courtesy Laura-Lee W. Woods

- * *Diagnosis*, 1996
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
40 1/2 x 26 inches
Courtesy Madison Cox

- * *Dialogue*, 1996
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
60 x 40 inches
Courtesy Martin Kline

Na raamro, 1996
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
41 x 26 inches
Courtesy Beth Rudin DeWoody

- * *Baba-B.G.*, 1997
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
41 3/8 x 29 1/8 inches
Private collection, courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery

- * *Cbalo, Cbalo, Cbalo!* 1997
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
59 1/2 x 40 1/4 inches
Courtesy Bruce Allyn Eissner and Judith Pick Eissner

- * *The Householder*, 1997
oil on wood panel
63 x 46 inches
Courtesy Janice and Mickey Cartin

The Last Freedom Fighter, 1997
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
41 1/2 x 29 3/4 inches
Private collection

- * *N.G.O. Wallabs*, 1997
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
41 3/8 x 29 3/4 inches
Courtesy Laura-Lee W. Woods

NRI #1, 1997
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
60 x 40 1/2 inches
Private collection

NRI #2, 1997
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
59 3/4 x 40 1/2 inches
Courtesy United Yarn Products Company, Inc.

Sights, 1997
watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper
30 x 22 1/4 inches
Collection University Art Museum
California State University, Long Beach

Improved Capital Flows, 1999
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
41 1/2 x 30 inches
Private collection

- * *Sensations of an Infant Heart*, 1999
watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper
59 1/2 x 40 1/2 inches
Courtesy Jerald Dillon Fessenden

- * John James Audubon
American (Haitian born), 1785-1851
The Birds of America, volumes 1-4
Published by the author 1827-1838,
London
Engraved, printed and colored by
R. Havell, Jr.
Special Collections and Archives,
Bowdoin College Library



Bowdoin College Museum of Art

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www.bowdoin.edu/artmuseum